



INTERLINGUAL CONTACTS IN THE TERRITORY OF UZBEKISTAN DURING THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

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Abstract

This article examines the interlingual interactions that took place in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan during the pre-Islamic period, with particular attention to their role in shaping the lexical, phonological, and cultural foundations of the Uzbek language. Situated at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road, the region became a vibrant hub of exchange among diverse civilizations, including Iranian, Greek, Indian, and Chinese cultures. Drawing on archaeological evidence, epigraphic inscriptions, and historical sources, the study demonstrates how the Sogdian, Khorezmian, and Bactrian languages, alongside Greek, Sanskrit, and Chinese, contributed significantly to the enrichment of Uzbek vocabulary and to the development of early written traditions. The findings highlight the extent to which religious-philosophical terminology, administrative and legal vocabulary, as well as trade-related lexicon, entered Uzbek through multilingual contact. By employing a historical-comparative and linguo-cultural approach, the research underscores that the Uzbek language embodies a multilayered heritage shaped by centuries of intercultural communication across Eurasia.

Keywords: Uzbek language; Sogdian; Khorezmian; Bactrian; Greek; Sanskrit; Chinese; Great Silk Road; lexical borrowing; cultural-linguistic contact.

Introduction

The territory of Uzbekistan has historically functioned as a vital geostrategic hub linking East and West. Situated at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road, this region became a nexus of civilizational contact, where cultural, economic, and



linguistic exchanges intertwined. Archaeological evidence, epigraphic inscriptions, and manuscript traditions testify to the multifaceted nature of these interlingual interactions, underscoring their decisive role in shaping the foundations of the Uzbek language. The influence of ancient languages such as Sogdian, Khorezmian, Bactrian, Greek, Sanskrit, and Chinese is not only evident in the lexical and phonological layers of Uzbek but also embedded in its cultural and historical memory. Consequently, the systematic study of pre-Islamic linguistic contacts in Central Asia represents a crucial scholarly undertaking for understanding the evolution of Uzbek linguistic identity.

Methods and Methodology

This study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining historical-linguistic, comparative, and cultural-semiotic methods:

1. Historical-descriptive method – to trace the chronological emergence and diffusion of ancient languages (Sogdian, Khorezmian, Bactrian, Greek, Sanskrit, and Chinese) across Central Asia.
2. Comparative-historical linguistics – to analyze phonetic, lexical, and grammatical influences on Uzbek, identifying borrowings and semantic shifts.
3. Textual and epigraphic analysis – to examine inscriptions (e.g., Sogdian documents from Dunhuang and Turfan, Rabatak inscription in Bactrian, Khorezmian legal texts from the Amu Darya) as primary sources of linguistic interaction.
4. Linguo-cultural approach – to interpret how borrowed terminology (religious, philosophical, commercial) reflects broader cultural, economic, and spiritual exchanges along the Silk Road.
5. Sociohistorical contextualization – to situate linguistic borrowings within the dynamics of trade, diplomacy, and empire-building in antiquity.

This combined methodology allows for a holistic reconstruction of the linguistic ecology of pre-Islamic Central Asia and its impact on the formation of Uzbek.

Literature Review

Scholarly research into the linguistic history of Central Asia emphasizes the profound influence of Iranian languages, particularly Sogdian and Khorezmian,



on the lexical and phonological strata of Uzbek (Masanov, 2002; Livshits, 2015). The Sogdian language has been described as the “international trade language” of the Silk Road (Yoshida, 2009), evidenced by extensive documentary finds in Dunhuang and Turfan. Its role in disseminating Zoroastrian religious-philosophical terminology—terms such as *otash* (fire) and *navro ‘z* (New Year)—is well established.

Khorezmian, likewise, served as the administrative and legal language of the Khorezm state, leaving traces in Uzbek toponyms such as *Urganch* and *Xiva*. Its phonetic features, such as the $\theta > s/t$ shift, demonstrate structural influence on later Turkic dialects.

The Bactrian language, uniquely written in the Greek script, is studied extensively for its role as the Kushan Empire’s official language (Sims-Williams, 2007). The Rabatak and Surkh-Kotal inscriptions illustrate its use in political, religious, and commercial contexts. Terms like *xudot* (sovereign) and *guzar* (crossing) testify to its lexical contribution to Uzbek.

The penetration of Greek and Latin terminology through Hellenistic culture and later via Arabic transmission is highlighted by scholars such as Harmatta (1994), particularly in philosophical (*philosophia*, *logikē*) and scientific (*astronomia*, *anatomia*) domains.

Sanskrit and Prakrit borrowings, especially during the Kushan era, are widely documented (Gnoli, 2002). Terms such as *karma*, *nirvana*, *dharma*, *yoga* enriched the spiritual lexicon of the region, while economic borrowings such as *shakar* (sugar) and *bazar* (marketplace) entered through Indo-Aryan contact.

Chinese influence is equally evident. The introduction of *choy* (tea), *ipak* (silk), *chinni* (porcelain), and *qog ‘oz* (paper) exemplifies the transfer of material culture into Uzbek through Sino-Central Asian trade (Pulleyblank, 1983). Chinese chronicles such as *Shi ji* and *Han shu* corroborate these exchanges, describing Fergana’s “heavenly horses” and the region’s strategic importance.

Collectively, these studies illustrate that Uzbek is the product of multilayered linguistic accretions shaped by trade, religion, and intercultural communication.

The Main Part



Uzbekistan's territory has long been renowned as a geostrategic center connecting East and West. Owing to its location at the crossroads of the Great Silk Road, the region became a sphere of interaction and synthesis among diverse civilizations, cultures, and languages. Archaeological findings, written sources, and ancient manuscripts demonstrate that linguistic and cultural contacts in this area were extensive and multifaceted [20, 44]. Therefore, the study of ancient interlingual interactions is a highly relevant scholarly issue for gaining a deeper understanding of the processes underlying the formation of the Uzbek language. The cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, and the Fergana Valley became centers of trade, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. In this process, alongside economic relations, linguistic influence among various peoples also intensified. Numerous terms borrowed from Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and Greek languages enriched the lexical layer of Uzbek. In particular, terminology related to trade, sericulture, paper production, handicrafts, and religion has been preserved in the language as part of its ancient stratum [3, 93].

Caravan routes served as the primary source of interlingual contact. In the pre-Uzbek period, the Sogdian, Khwarezmian, and Bactrian peoples who inhabited this region were renowned for their trading activities, and in their interactions with various nations they widely employed their native languages. For instance, the Sogdian language functioned as an "international language" between East and West [31, 45]. As a result, extensive lexical exchange occurred among different languages, which later played a significant role in the development of Uzbek. Through caravan routes, not only words but also cultural values, traditions, and religious-philosophical ideas entered the region [30, 128].

The widespread use of ancient writing systems in the territory of Uzbekistan clearly illustrates the cultural traces of interlingual contact. The Sogdian script, the Khwarezmian writings, as well as the Bactrian script based on the Greek alphabet were widely used in this region. For example, during the Kushan Empire, the Bactrian language, written in the Greek script, functioned as the official administrative language [9, 77]. Likewise, Sogdian inscriptions discovered in Samarkand and Bukhara served as the basis for international trade documents. These writing systems played a crucial role not only in economic transactions but also in the development of cultural and religious life.



Archaeological findings indicate that through such scripts, spiritual ties between Eastern and Western civilizations were significantly reinforced [5].

The Sogdians of Central Asia, renowned since antiquity for their mercantile activities, were widely acknowledged as the principal intermediaries between East and West. Chinese historical chronicles provide extensive accounts of Sogdian merchants, emphasizing their role in transporting silk, precious stones, porcelain, and other commodities along the Great Silk Road [3, 88]. As a result, between the fifth and eighth centuries CE, the Sogdian language acquired the status of an “international trade language.” Evidence of this is found in documents unearthed in Dunhuang (China) and Turfan (Eastern Turkestan), which contain Sogdian inscriptions, clearly attesting to its widespread function as a commercial and legal lingua franca [10, 132].

The influence of the Sogdian language on the formation of Uzbek is particularly evident in the lexical stratum. Numerous words related to trade and economic life were borrowed from Sogdian. For instance, terms such as *divon* (accounting office), *bozor* (market), and *bahor* (spring) trace their etymological roots to Sogdian [20, p. 57]. Phonetic influence is also observable in certain Uzbek words. In particular, the soft articulation of consonants and the presence of the initial “b-” sound in some words (e.g., *bozor* – *bazaar*) are regarded as linguistic legacies inherited from Sogdian [31, 76].

Through the Sogdian language, religious and philosophical terminology also entered Uzbek. For example, concepts associated with Zoroastrianism such as *otash* (fire) and *navro‘z* (New Year) became widely disseminated and firmly embedded in the vernacular [1, p. 211].

The Sogdian script was one of the key factors in the development of culture and trade in Central Asia. Inscriptions discovered in ancient cities such as Samarkand, Panjikent, and Varakhsha demonstrate the broad cultural and economic use of this language [4, p. 214]. The Sogdian script was employed not only in commercial documents but also in religious texts and literary works.

The influence of Sogdian writing was also felt in the later written traditions of Turkic peoples. In particular, the Old Uyghur script was closely related to Sogdian, borrowing from it both graphically and phonetically [8, p. 38]. Thus, it



can be argued that the Sogdian script played a significant role in the early formation of Uzbek written culture.

Ancient Khorezm (corresponding to present-day Khorezm Province, Karakalpakstan, and the Amu Darya delta) was historically one of the major political and cultural centers of the region. The Khorezmian language belonged to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European family and was closely related to Sogdian and Bactrian [20, 94]. It was actively used from the mid–first millennium BCE until the 10th century CE.

The Khorezmian script developed its own alphabet, initially based on the Aramaic script but later adapted to local modifications. Archaeological finds from sites such as Tangritog‘, Qoyqirilgan Qal‘a, and Topraq Qal‘a testify to its wide application. Khorezmian inscriptions are particularly attested on wall writings, coins, and documents related to religious rituals [6, 88].

As an independent political entity, the Khorezm state used the Khorezmian language as the primary medium for legal and administrative governance. Ancient documents recorded in Khorezmian include land ownership records, taxation notes, and military decrees [25, 156].

For example, documents discovered along the banks of the Amu Darya reveal detailed accounts of economic calculations and land relations. These texts provide valuable insights into Khorezmian terminology, such as *bandak* (slave), *xvatay* (landowner), and *afridak* (tax collector) [32, 63].

Furthermore, the Khorezmian language was employed as a primary medium in Zoroastrian religious ceremonies. Certain passages of the *Avesta* contain expressions borrowed from Khorezmian, underscoring its role in the spiritual life of the region [1, 212].

The influence of Khorezmian on the formation of the Uzbek language is most evident in the phonetic and lexical layers. A number of ancient terms and toponyms have been preserved in Uzbek. For example, *Urganch* (from Khorezmian *urgenč*, a city name) and *Xiva* (from Khorezmian *xwārezm*, a place name) derive directly from Khorezmian roots [4, 212].

In terms of phonetic influence, the Khorezmian sound θ (similar to the English “th”) later shifted into *s* or *t* in Uzbek. For instance, the Khorezmian word *xvata* (tax) entered the Turkic lexicon through the form *xazna* (treasury) [33, 54].



Grammatically, certain possessive suffixes and verb forms used in Khorezmian later appeared in contact with Turkic languages. For example, the possessive suffix –ak/–ek is attested in some ancient Uzbek dialects [19, 77].

Thus, Ancient Khorezmian served not only as a political-administrative and religious language in Central Asia but also as a significant linguistic legacy. Its writing system, administrative usage, and religious role exerted a notable influence on the phonological, lexical, and grammatical development of the Uzbek language.

The Bactrian language, also belonging to the Iranian family, was widespread primarily in northern Afghanistan, Surkhandarya (Uzbekistan), and parts of Tajikistan. Between the 1st and 4th centuries CE, it functioned as the official language of the Kushan Empire [9, 56]. During this period, Bactrian served as a medium for political-administrative governance, commerce, and diplomacy. According to Chinese sources, Kushan rulers often conducted correspondence with neighboring states in Bactrian [22, 117].

The Bactrian language was also employed in the religious literatures of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Manichaeism. In particular, during the reign of the Kushan ruler Kanishka, the resolutions of the great religious council were recorded in Bactrian [30, 204], underscoring its role in the spiritual and cultural life of the period.

One of the most distinctive features of Bactrian is that it was the only Iranian language written in the Greek alphabet [11, 65]. Although Greek influence spread into the region after the campaigns of Alexander the Great, under the Kushans the Greek script was adapted to the local tongue, resulting in a 25-letter alphabet [16, 79].

Among the most significant inscriptions is the Rabatak inscription (2nd century CE), which records the decrees of King Kanishka in Bactrian. Discovered in present-day Afghanistan, it documents the king's conquests over Indian, Iranian, and Greek territories [23, 92]. Likewise, inscriptions in Bactrian have been found in the Surkh-Kotal temple complex (Afghanistan) [4, 214].

Bactrian documents—including property records, trade agreements, and religious texts—played a crucial role in strengthening the foundations of written culture that contributed to the formation of the Uzbek language.



The influence of Bactrian is most evident in the lexical layer of Uzbek. Many terms related to commerce, culture, and religion from the Kushan period have left their mark on the modern language. For example:

- xudot (“sovereign, ruler”), which later entered Turkic languages as xudo (“God”) [33, 133];
- devona, derived from Bactrian diwan (“accounting office”);
- farrox/farrux (“fortunate, blessed”), which became widespread in Uzbek anthroponymy;
- guzar (“road, crossing place”), borrowed directly from Bactrian guzar [19, 221].

Phonetic traces of Bactrian influence are also visible. For instance, the consonant cluster *-pt-* was assimilated into Turkic as *-ft-* or simplified to *-p-*. An example is the transmission of Latin *capital* through Bactrian as *kapetal* [7, 84].

During the Kushan Empire, Bactrian served as both the state and cultural language. Its use of the Greek alphabet distinguished it from other Iranian languages. The corpus of Bactrian documents and inscriptions contributed significantly to the enrichment of the lexical stock of Uzbek. Even today, remnants of Bactrian can be observed in numerous words and toponyms.

In the 4th century BCE, following the campaigns of Alexander the Great, Greek culture penetrated Central Asia. In particular, in Sogdiana and Bactria, Hellenistic cities were established, and administrative documents began to be maintained in Greek [16, 241]. Under the influence of Greek culture, changes occurred in the arts, architecture, and written traditions of the local population. During the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, Greek functioned not only as the language of administration but also as a lingua franca of international diplomacy and trade [12, 88].

Numismatic evidence provides vivid illustrations of this influence: numerous coins bear inscriptions in Greek, including the names of rulers, their titles, and political slogans. For instance, the Greek inscriptions on the coins of Demetrius and Eucratides reflect the Hellenistic political and cultural environment of that period [18, 119].

The introduction of philosophical and scientific terminology. Through Greek and later Latin, a wide range of philosophical and scientific terms entered Central Asia. Greek philosophical concepts such as *philosophy* (*philosophia*), *logic* (*logikē*), *mathematics* (*mathematikē*), and *astronomy* (*astronomia*) eventually



penetrated Uzbek via Arabic mediation [2, 76]. Similarly, in medicine, concepts like *anatomy*, *pharmacopoeia*, and *hygiene* trace their roots to Greek-Latin origins. The works of Hippocrates and Galen, translated into Arabic and transmitted to the scholarly centers of Central Asia, influenced the formation of the scientific lexicon of Uzbek [28, 152].

The impact on military and legal terminology. Greek and Latin also left traces in the military and legal vocabulary. For example:

- strategos (Greek *stratēgos*, “commander”) was assimilated in Turkic contexts as a synonym for *sardor* (“leader”);
- legion (Latin *legio*, “army”) and centurion (Latin *centurio*, “commander of a hundred”) were partially adopted in military-administrative contexts;
- senate (Latin *senatus*, “council of state”) and consul (Latin *consul*, “state official”) entered Islamic-era legal and political lexicon through Arabic, aligning with concepts such as *majlis* and *kengash* in Uzbek [24, 204].

Furthermore, certain notions rooted in Greco-Roman law were later transmitted through Islamic jurisprudential literature into Uzbek legal vocabulary. For instance, terms such as *constitution* (Latin *constitutio*) and *code* (Latin *codex*) continue to appear in Uzbek, either directly or through Arabic mediation [13, 98]. Thus, the influence of Greek and Latin left a profound mark on the history of Central Asia and the Uzbek language. During the Hellenistic period, Greek became a language of international communication, while philosophical, scientific, and medical terminology entered Uzbek through Arabic translations. Military and legal terms were integrated into later Turkic and Islamic traditions, enriching the lexical layers of Uzbek.

Contacts with India. Central Asia had longstanding and direct connections with India. Through the Great Silk Road and caravan routes, the Amu Darya valley facilitated trade with India, importing gold, spices, medicines, silk, and precious stones, while exporting local goods to India [3, 211]. Historical sources attest that Bactrian and Sogdian merchants were especially active in commercial exchanges with India [30, 94].

As a result of trade and cultural exchanges, Indian religious-philosophical traditions (Buddhism, Hinduism) also penetrated Central Asia. During the Kushan Empire (1st–4th centuries CE), Buddhism spread widely, with religious



texts composed in Sanskrit and Prakrit, which later influenced the languages of Turkic peoples [15, 187]. Sanskrit, as the primary source of religious and philosophical terminology, exerted strong influence on Central Asian languages. For example:

- karma – fate, the consequence of action;
- nirvana – spiritual purity, tranquility;
- mandala – religious-philosophical circle or concept;
- avatar – divine manifestation, reincarnation;
- yoga – a system of spiritual and physical practices.

These terms were later transmitted into Uzbek through Arabic-Persian sources and continue to be used in religious and philosophical discourse today [17, 65]. Similarly, Buddhist concepts such as *dharma* (“law”) and *samsara* (“cycle of rebirth”) are found in the ancient layer of religious vocabulary [14, 92].

The influence of Indian languages on Uzbek is evident not only in the religious-philosophical domain but also in vocabulary related to economy and crafts. Examples include:

- *shakar* (from Sanskrit *śarkarā* – sugar);
- *bazar* (from Hindi *bājār* – marketplace);
- *gul* (from Sanskrit *gula* – flower);
- *sutra* (from Sanskrit *sūtra* – thread, rule) [27, 144].

Some Indian-rooted words entered Uzbek via Arabic and Persian mediation and became firmly established in the lexicon. For instance, *dori* (from *dhāraṇī* – medicinal plant), *tamaka/tamaki* (from Hindi *tamakku*), and *nil* (from Sanskrit *nīla* – blue, indigo dye) are actively used in modern Uzbek [19, 221].

Thus, the influence of Indian languages—particularly Sanskrit—was significant in the history of Central Asia and the Uzbek language. Through trade and cultural exchange, Indian words entered the lexicon of economy and crafts, while religious traditions brought philosophical and theological terms. This enriched the lexical stock of Uzbek, making it a multilayered historical heritage.

Uzbekistan has also long stood at the crossroads of economic and cultural relations with China. Along the Great Silk Road, Central Asia exported horses, gold, precious stones, and handicrafts to China, while importing silk, porcelain, and paper [16, 214]. Chinese chronicles (e.g., *Shi ji* and *Han shu*) refer to the



Fergana Valley as “Dayuan,” praising its horses as “heavenly steeds” [21, 98]. These trade relations facilitated not only economic but also linguistic exchanges. Several Chinese words left a permanent mark on Uzbek vocabulary. For example:

- *choy* (茶 *chá*, tea) – first spread from China to Central Asia;
- *ipak* (絲 *sī*, silk) – linked to Chinese sericulture;
- *chinni* (瓷 *cí*, porcelain) – associated with Chinese ceramics;
- *qog‘oz* (紙 *zhǐ*, paper) – invented in China in the 2nd century CE and later disseminated worldwide through Samarkand [26, 177].

The adoption of these terms into Uzbek demonstrates the depth of Sino-Central Asian trade and cultural relations. Samarkand became a renowned center for paper production, a tradition directly derived from Chinese technology [3, 212]. Chinese sources also record numerous geographical names related to Central Asia, such as *Anxi* (Parthia), *Kangju* (Syr Darya region), and *Dayuan* (Fergana) [19, 54]. These toponyms later appeared in Uzbek historical narratives and written sources.

Moreover, some Uzbek words may themselves have Chinese origins. For example, *naycha* (“straw, tube”) is linked to Chinese tea-drinking traditions, originally using bamboo straws [4, 142]. Variants of the word *sharbat* (“syrup, beverage”) are also believed to have entered Central Asia through Chinese mediation.

The influence of the Chinese language and culture on Uzbek is particularly visible in terms related to trade, crafts, sericulture, ceramics, and paper. Furthermore, Chinese chronicles documenting Central Asian toponyms demonstrate Uzbekistan’s long-standing connections with China. This influence enriched the Uzbek lexicon and deepened its historical-cultural layers.

Conclusion

The pre-Islamic linguistic history of Uzbekistan reveals a dynamic process of contact, borrowing, and integration that profoundly shaped the structure and vocabulary of the Uzbek language. Sogdian functioned as a lingua franca of commerce; Khorezmian contributed administrative, legal, and religious terminology; Bactrian served as both a state and cultural language under the



Kushans; Greek and Latin introduced scientific and philosophical lexicon; Sanskrit enriched the spiritual and economic vocabulary; and Chinese facilitated the spread of trade-related terminology and technologies such as silk and paper. These diverse influences converged within the sociohistorical context of the Silk Road, embedding multilingual and multicultural layers into Uzbek. The findings underscore that the Uzbek language is not solely a product of Turkic development but also a repository of Iranian, Indian, Greek, and Chinese linguistic legacies. Further research at the intersection of linguistics, archaeology, and cultural history promises to deepen our understanding of the region's role as a historical laboratory of linguistic synthesis.

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